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SUBJECT: EXAMINATION OF POLITICAL PRESSURE IN SLOVAK MEDIA

¶1. SUMMARY: Since its inception the governing coalition led by Prime Minister Robert Fico, has brawled with the press. This "open war," as the spokesman for the Ministry of Culture has termed it, is exacerbated by statements from the Prime Minister's office insisting on more coverage by public media of its programs and cries from journalists claiming they are under political pressure to change stories. On the surface this is an alarming blow to freedom of the press, but the story is more complex than that. Journalism in Slovakia is not without its problems, but when taken as a whole, it is robust and independent. END SUMMARY

¶2. Animosity between the press and Smer is long lived. On the eve of Prime Minister Fico's election victory last year, the winning party had all press covering them wait outside in the alley beside the party headquarters building. They were left without light, electricity or seats. Reporters wrote that party operatives demanded to see press credentials when journalists needed to use the toilet. Prime Minister elect Fico and his deputy, Robert Kalinak refused to meet with the media. When Slovak Television failed to cover his trip to Italy, Prime Minister Fico called the Director of STV and made it clear that covering political trips were to be a priority for the station. Recently Prime Minister Fico declared that the only neutral newspaper in the country was the tabloid (and most widely read newspaper) Novy Cas, branding all the others as playing the part of the "political opposition."

¶3. Prime Minister Fico and his Culture Minister, Marek Madaric not only bemoan the lack of professionalism of the media but have decided to try to correct the problem legislatively. Accordingly, the Ministry of Culture proposed a new print media law (current law dates from 1966). The main objective of the proposed law is to require newspapers to print the statements of government officials and others who believe they have been wronged by a story. The Slovak Syndicate of Journalists nominally supports the print media law, which may pass as early as September, because the one currently on the books is outdated. The syndicate, however, points out that the current draft fails to define what is and is not open for the government or organizations to force a newspaper to print a reply. It remains to be seen what the final version of this law will look like, but currently it has provisions that require transparency in ownership of print media.

¶4. Despite the rhetoric from the government and pending legislation, there are some longer term positive developments in Slovak news organizations. The trend, according to a poll of journalists in 2005, was a lessening of political pressure. Reporters were asked to compare instances of political pressure to change stories between 1997 and 2005. Those who stated that they received frequent pressure to change stories was roughly equal at 12.75% in 1997 and 11.1% in 2005. Those reporters who experienced occasional political pressure fell from 51.6% in 1997 to 38.5% in 2005, while those reporting no pressure rose from 35.7% in 1997 to 50.4% in 2005.

¶5. Slovak media is attracting better educated journalists. In 1967 53% of journalists had education levels below college level, 21% had degrees in a non-journalism field and 25% held degrees in the field

of journalism. By 2005 only 26% had less than a college degree, 39% held a degree in a non-journalism field and 34% held degrees in journalism.

¶6. Allegations of political pressure exist, but the numbers cited above come from all reporters and are credible. The improving statistics can be attributed to the fact that all of Slovakia's national dailies are in foreign hands. Ronald Lauder's Bermuda-based broadcasting company CME now owns Markiza Television outright and all major, national newspapers are owned by multinational corporations whose larger concern is the bottom line. Although the papers tend to return the ill will the government holds for them, their reporting does not smack of partisan politics. Slovakia's media plurality is healthy and although the government has continued to attack the media, it is not under any serious threat of political manipulation.

Alleged Political Interference at Slovak Television

¶7. A news-making crisis at Slovak Television (STV), although billed as the epitome of political pressure, is a complicated story that belies the reports. Six months after the Bohomir Bobocky-led Slovak Television Council elected Radim Hreha to the post of General Director of STV and Jn mihula was appointed editor-in-chief of the station's news desk, five journalists left, with rumors of others to follow. Prominent papers quoted the reporters as citing political pressure on their reporting as the reason specifically that government officials called to push for favorable coverage of the ruling coalition. In an unprecedented move the Slovak Television Council convened a public hearing and invited the reporters to present their case against the management of STV. The five-hour hearing was emotional and accusatory, but in the end the council decided that there was no proof of the accusations of political influence at the station. The council decided that a committee will be formed to further investigate the accusations. In informal

conversations with former STV reporters who attended the hearing, they made claims that equal political pressure existed under former General Director Richard Rybnicek- who was appointed under the previous government- and that no public hearing ever came from that shake up.

¶8. Discussions with professionals inside and outside the Slovak Television Council paint an unfortunate confluence of neglect and incompetence as the culprits behind the current difficulties at STV. The troika of Hreha, Bobocky and Smihula has created, through incompetence and inexperience, a debilitating situation for STV. Both Hreha and Bobocky are described as, "dilettantes." Bohomir Bobocky, who should shape strategic policy for the station, meddles instead in day-to day workings of the station. Radim Hreha, who came here from previous media jobs in the Czech Republic, is so incompetent that he is unable to prevent Mr. Bobocky from creating chaos in the station. Jan Smihula simply lacks professional experience.

¶9. Beyond the problems with the current leadership of STV, it is a broken system. It has been under funded or plundered for so long that both physical infrastructure and personnel structures are ailing. Modern technology layered on top of legacy equipment negatively impacts production quality, and the loss of experienced people to other stations or careers negatively affects content. STV cannot even maintain its building, and its production of original programming is almost non-existent. Hreha has asked for an additional 500 million crowns, but the station is unlikely to get any infusion of that magnitude.

¶10. Under the last government, STV was overhauled to stop losing money. Production was cut, and more commercial programming was introduced. Over the last few years STV has joined its two commercial rivals, Markiza and TVJOJ, in offering a slate of reality shows, eroding its public service function and diminishing its credibility.

¶11. Under funding is one of the chronic problems for public media. Slovak Radio, for example, has recalled virtually all of its foreign-based correspondents to save money. A new law, separate from the print media law, has been proposed that will require

households with electricity hookups to pay a fee for television and radio. This is different from the existing law in that currently only households with televisions need pay the fee. Members of the Television Council believe that the new law on media fees, if passed, would increase collections from 60% of those who should be liable to closer to 80%. This could be a boost in revenue of up to 300 million crowns. The bill should come up for a vote in September, but opinion holds that because the increase in fees it entails makes it an unpopular measure, Robert Fico's populism will force him to quash it. If this happens, public media will continue to suffer declines in the service it provides.

Comment

112. Although Fico's "war" against the press is unlikely to result in any significant eroding of press freedom, his approach and his populism do carry consequences. One, of course, is possible self-censorship by the media out of concern for government reaction.

Further, Fico's populism will most likely prevent him from allowing the passage of sorely needed funding mechanisms for public television and radio. This will further weaken an already ailing channel for Slovaks to obtain news. His unabated railing against the media has played for a time. So far, the Fico government has remained very popular despite mostly critical media treatment. But such treatment can erode popularity over time, as it did with Mr. Fico's predecessor.

SILVERMAN